Inspired to Stitch

21 TEXTILE ARTISTS

DIANA SPRINGALL

FOREWORD BY EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH

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For all that I have learned about a computer I have Marie Boulton to thank. I must also record with gratitude the patience and support of my long suffering family and friends for whom this must have seemed a never ending assignment.

Above all I want to offer this book in praise of British embroiderers and of these twenty one artists who have so generously and enthusiastically embraced this project.

Diana Springall
Kemsing 2005

Foreword – Stitchery and Society

There are certain things that any attentive reader will immediately notice about the contents of this book. First, that the artists it celebrates are all female. Second, that – while many of them are justly famous in the contemporary arts-and-crafts community – quite a number confess to economic difficulties in pursuing their chosen form of creative expression. Third, the book reflects a real sense of community, with skills being handed on from one practitioner to another. All of these are topics that need to be addressed, however briefly.

The first and second are closely linked. Until very recently, women faced conspicuous difficulties when they tried to make their way in the world of the so-called 'fine arts'. The craft world was a great deal more welcoming, and indeed certain areas of activity have been regarded traditionally as the province of women. In the Western European world embroidery is one of these. Yet even in this area historical perception is slightly skewed. The great works of embroidery for which medieval England was famous – so much so that the general European name for them was 'opus anglicanum' – were often the product of male craftsmen, and not of women.

Gradually this situation changed, as the division between fine art – painting, sculpture and architecture – and other forms of creativity in the visual arts began to impose itself. Embroidery, even at its most skilled levels, became one of two things. Either it was a domestic activity, not undertaken for pay, but for its own sake and as a means of adorning a household; or else it was an activity connected with fashion – the adornment of things to wear. Here, too, there was a slippage from male to female. As the beautifully embroidered silk coats of 18th century court dress were replaced by the sober garments introduced by Beau Brummel, embroidered decoration became something largely confined to women's garments. Even the colourful hippie clothing of the 19th century could not entirely reverse this trend.

This meant that it lost status not only in purely artistic but also in economic terms. The great works of skilled medieval embroiderers were certainly, as surviving documents demonstrate, among the most costly luxury items of their time. Painters, still regarded as artisans on a level with a whole range of other craftspeople, were not necessarily paid more, and were sometimes paid considerably less, as their work was regarded as less labour-intensive and used, on the whole, less costly materials.

Once embroidery sank into the purely domestic sphere, the fact that it was a highly skilled area of creativity began to be discounted. The amount of labour it required was also discounted. It was seen as a female accomplishment, undertaken for its own sake – a subtle assertion of gentility, and a pleasant way for women of the leisured class to pass their time. In those spheres where it remained a professional skill, it was the province of poorly paid female workers – an ancillary of the fashion industry.

Within families, and also within communities, there was nevertheless both a strong sense of pride in the exercise of needle skills. Embroidery – working together, the sharing of techniques, and the small rituals involved in passing on these techniques from one generation to another – became part of a specifically female universe. This pattern was especially prominent in the pioneering communities of the 18th and 19th century United States where, for example, quilting bees often played an important part in social life, but it also showed itself in Britain.

It is this tradition that still, in part at least, informs contemporary needlework. Traces of it can be seen quite clearly in the life-stories of the embroiderers whose lives and accomplishments are chronicled in this book.

There is, however, another side to the story. We now live in a world where the boundaries between the various forms of artistic making are largely dissolved. The system of categorization set up by Renaissance theoreticians no longer applies to contemporary art, which can be made using any technique or any material or combination of materials. Unfortunately this wide-ranging eclecticism, combined with the cult of the 'readymade' [a concept invented by Marcel Duchamp in the second decade of the 20th century], has brought with it an increasing disrespect for, and indeed an ingrained suspicion of, obvious manual skills.

This has opened a new and different breach between the world of the fine arts and that of the crafts. It has led to a retreat into the world of the crafts of people who are

fascinated both by the perfection of a particular set of skills, who also gain satisfaction from the production of actual physical objects.

Women have found additional reasons for identifying themselves with what is called craft rather than what is called art. The whole tradition of 'great painting' and 'great sculpture' is dominated by males. There is no female equivalent for Michelangelo. For this reason many women makers have opted to exercise their creativity in genres where a masculine history is less oppressively present.

The leading American feminist artist Judy Chicago has elaborated on this in a number of ambitious projects, such as the 'Birth Project' [1980–5] and the more recent 'Resolutions: A Stitch in Time' [1994–2000]. These, however, are not the work of a single individual, but are collaborations between an artist who does not sew and a team of highly skilled embroiderers. The work shown in this book, by contrast, is carried out by the same person, from first to last.

When we look at these processes – each embroiderer has her own individual method, so the plural form of the word is appropriate – unexpected elements emerge. It is interesting to see, for example, how many of these embroiderers were originally painters. It is also interesting to see how many of them make drawing an integral part of their preparation. Their drawings are fluent and show a high degree of skill.

Many of the finished works operate in precisely the same way as paintings and drawings – that is, they are intended to be hung on a wall, as art works independent of any practical function. There is a tendency, amongst avant-garde artists, curators and critics, to see objects that are clearly function-less, yet equally clearly craft-based, as unworthy parodies of genuinely experimental creative activity – in fact as a form of kitsch. Even this brings with it certain complications, since kitsch duly saturated with irony – the work of Jeff Koons is an example – now has an honoured place within the avant-garde pantheon.

What we have here seems to be the operation of an unacknowledged glass ceiling, a variant of the blockages women notoriously encounter when they embark on business careers. Contemporary embroidery has to struggle against art world prejudice for recognition and – not incidentally – for real financial status. Part of this prejudice is based on gender, and on historical perceptions linked to gender: the post-Renaissance image of embroidery as being primarily a domestic activity undertaken by women in the privacy of the home, usually without any real thought of material reward.

Part of it, however, and perhaps the larger part, is founded on the contemporary art world's extremely ambiguous attitude towards skill. Virtuoso skills, which is to say manual dexterity and technical ability well beyond the reach of most people, are especially suspect. This is particularly ironic, since the same qualities are worshipped in the professional sports that play so large a role in our society. In the case of sport, football for instance, skill clearly facilitates spontaneity. In the case of contemporary art, critics often seem to feel that skill impedes the spontaneous expression of true, visceral creativity.

Since the 1960s, art criticism has paid a good deal of attention to what is labeled 'process-based art'. Generally what commentators mean by this is a kind of art that is self-reflexive, in the sense that its subject is simply the process or set of processes through which it has come into existence. It is possible, I suppose, to appreciate embroidery in this way. Indeed, I suspect that some obsessives look at an ambitious example of embroidered work entirely from this very limited viewpoint. They want to work out exactly how it was done.

I don't think this is the audience that the embroiderers featured in this book really want. Their primary aim is to give delight by using skill combined with imagination to create things that will be immediately recognized as being beautiful. This book may help to get them the credit that is their due.

Edward Lucie-Smith
January 2005

Introduction

The most wonderful aspect of embroidery, when practised by those who can take it to the highest level, is its status as both an art and a craft. In the hands of some, who adopt it for leisure, it may remain a craft; for others who choose to adopt it in search of peace, courage and so many other aspirations, it is often therapeutic and constructive.

Above all, in Britain, embroidery is a subject unique in bringing professionals and amateurs together as equals.

This is the story of some of the most outstanding embroiderers to have emerged, in the last half century, from a higher education system that valued the significance of observational drawing.

It is about artists who have become committed exponents of the use of needle and thread and of their skill in raising this craft to an art form. It is no accident that they are all, without exception, the result of an art school system that founded all material skills on the principles of art. They are before the time of the late twentieth century pre- occupation with theory and academia and remain largely untouched by the new educational importance placed on the use of new technology. They remain outside the realms of the fashionable conceptual approach.

It is a period that starts with a dearth of embroidery materials and ends with present day consumer over-abundance; it starts at a time that was devoid of specialist textile exhibitions and ends with expectations of shows that encompass massive enterprise; The Knitting and Stitching Shows attract in excess of 100,000 visitors annually.

This is a book about people; of how and why they come to do what they do so spectacularly. Influences, often from an early age, are revealed in order to demonstrate the relevance of circumstance in the destiny of individual achievement.

Through their self-generating approach to both circumstances of life, and to their highly specialised training in the concepts of art, many have reached world leadership in the subject.

This collection of very personal and innovative journeys, in the use of materials and techniques, shows the extension of the creative process.

This appraisal is also intended to contribute to the existing long history of embroidery in the British Isles dating back to medieval times.

It may also serve to break down the artificial boundaries between art and craft; the work of those described within amply demonstrates that they are but one. Embroiderers of this calibre are worthy, not only of the definition of artist and craftsman, but in time, deserve to be revered with the same awe that we today hold for the best of what has gone before.

This is a book about the significant and very different direction that embroidery took following the end of the Second World War. The main reason for this being that from 1945 its inspiration and development was art school led. The momentous year was 1954, when embroidery first became the subject of a formal qualification, the National Diploma in Design (NDD); alongside Painting, Sculpture and Illustration.

Inclusion as one of the fine arts, as with other craft based subjects of the time, was however transparently tenuous. Ironically too, just when embroidery appeared to be joining the fine arts, government funding for the arts was to be dispensed by two separate bodies, The Arts Council and The Crafts Council. A line firmly separated arts from crafts creating a situation that had not existed before and one that only now, at least in terminology, was reversed in April 2003.

In a single volume one cannot hope to include everyone who sews artistically. What is hoped is that it will serve to highlight a belief in the worth of the subject when practised at a rare and individual level.

Those with exceptional talent may be few but their importance places them very firmly in the world of Art – they have certainly made the world a richer place and created a heritage, which will surely stand the test of time.

It is a book written out of respect, admiration and some understanding of what has been achieved.

Above all, in the absence of being able to do anything to redress the twentieth century art/craft divide it seemed essential to document works of this calibre in a contemporary *salon des refusés* – albeit in book form.

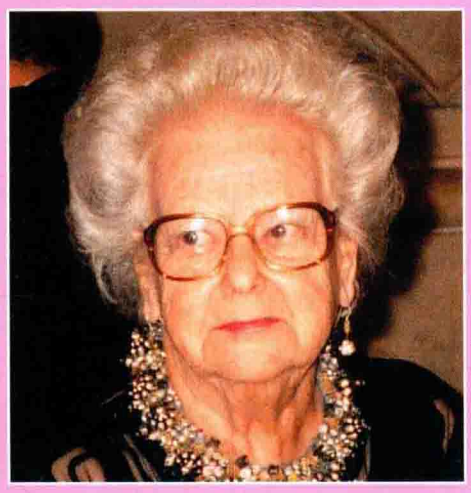

Photo: Diana Springall

MARGARET NICHOLSON

1913	Born Sheffield 13 March
1928 – 1933	Sheffield College of Art Industrial Design Cert (later NDD) Received City and Guilds Gold Medal Evening teaching assistant Sheffield College of Art Teaching Chesterfield College of Art/Embroidery/Crafts Student Member Embroiderers' Guild
1930 – 1933	West Riding of Yorkshire Wombwell Institute, teaching miners' wives
1933 – 1939	Dress designer for Brook Manufacturing Co – producing large multiple orders for Marks & Spencer, C & A and British Home Stores. Company later taken over by The Calico Printers and finally by Courtauld. Designed copies of the famous black circular skirt and white blouse favoured by the Duchess of Windsor. Also the version of her wedding outfit for Marks and Spencer, which was sold in hundreds at the Marble Arch branch
1937	Married
1939	Outbreak of war and move to Evesham – husband worked for the BBC
1945	Anthea born
1946	BBC now back in Bush House London and with it family removal
1946 – 1954	Lived in Potters Bar
1954 – 1981	Move to Brookmans Park
1958	Herts W.I. Craft Committee and National W.I. Craft Committee with Avril Colby, Laura Ashley, Hebe Cox Member The Embroiderers' Guild teaching Wimpole Street Headquarters Executive Committee member
1959	Hammersmith College of Art and Building Refresher Course
1960	Author *Making a Quilt for Denman College* Spring issue Womens' Institute Magazine, *Home and Country*
1961	Author *A New Approach* Summer issue of *Embroidery*
1962 – 3	Teaching evening classes at Stanhope Institute
1965 – 1980	Lecturer Design Department at London College of Fashion
1965	Author *Appliqué Work* Spring issue of *Embroidery*
1966 – 1976	Stoke D'Abernon Teachers Courses for ILEA with D. Allsopp and I. Hills
1966	Author *St Clare Panels* Summer issue *Embroidery*
1967	Author *Embroidery in Fashion* Summer issue of *Embroidery* Author *Making a Notebook* Autumn issue of *Embroidery*
1970	Author *The Lady Banner at Coventry Cathedral* Autumn issue *Embroidery*
1974	Author *Decoration in Fashion* Winter issue *Embroidery*
1976	Author *From a Student's Sketchbook* Autumn issue *Embroidery*
1980 –	Designing and embroidering pictures, boxes, book covers
1988	Widowed
1995	Review in August issue *Needlework* Review Autumn issue *Embroidery* Author *Ideas for Necklets* Christmas issue *Embroidery*
1999	Review in June issue *Needlecraft*
2000	Author *Beaded Fringe Technique* June issue The Beadworkers' Guild Magazine
2001	Author *Creative Bead Work for Beginners* June issue of The Beadworkers' Guild Magazine
2003	Profile included British Library National Sound Archive Nation Life Story Collection - Fashion
2004	Review in first issue Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Magazine

Right: Detail, *The Sorcerer,* 2001, Or Nué, inspired by a visit to the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition on fairies in Victorian Art

Margaret Nicholson

Margaret is the epitome of what it is to be surrounded by art from birth.

Even more specifically, her passion for the use of gold cannot be anything other than directly inherited from her father, a noted guilder working in most of the great houses and churches. She says 'I was brought up with gold leaf – we *played* with gold leaf!'

Margaret's ninetieth birthday retrospective exhibition, at The London College of Fashion in March 2003, was an awe-inspiring experience, largely because of her unique artistic handling of both real and synthetic gold thread. Her achievements, in panel after panel of *or nué*[1], securely place her in the realms of both artist and master craftsman.

Encouraged by her grandfather the family lived in a world of art; all their magazines and books were about art. As a consequence by the time Margaret had reached the age of fourteen she recalls friends saying to her parents 'your daughter really ought to go to Art College.' With no thought to do anything other than to study art, the inevitable move came at the age of sixteen with admission to Sheffield College of Art.

In 1929 the five-year Industrial Design course began with a first year which was entirely based on drawing of every kind –' there were always things to draw – it was very much a Fine Art course'. Two years of different crafts followed and finally a chance to choose to specialise in dress and embroidery. She was one of the few students at that period to view this medium as a serious living; instead most girls regarded fashion and needle skills as an opt-out from work.

These years were further enhanced by attending an additional course in embroidery in order to achieve her City & Guilds of London Institute status, for which she was awarded the 1933 gold medal.